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RESEARCH

The Dangers of Getting What You Asked For: Double Time in *Twin Peaks: The Return*

Dominic Lash
University of Bristol, GB
domlash@hotmail.com

The third season of *Twin Peaks* is chock full of uncanny, disturbing – and disturbingly humorous – doubles, most notably of its central character, played by Kyle McLachlan. This article argues that the series itself is also a kind of double, because it takes advantage of the almost unique situation in which a beloved show is continued after a quarter-century absence to superimpose itself on the new versions of *Twin Peaks* its fans have fantasized in the interim. Through close readings, I critically examine the ways that *The Return* does this and explore the different – and often mutually incompatible – interpretive strategies that it thereby encourages. I argue that the series ultimately achieves a paradoxical fidelity to its predecessor precisely through the liberties and calculated risks that it takes with its own heritage.

Keywords: David Lynch; *Twin Peaks*; double; time; anticipation; memory; uncanny; nostalgia; confusion

Figure 1: Two Coopers (*Twin Peaks*, season 3, episode 14. Image screenshot from 25 min 10 secs).

As well as containing an abundance of doubles, *Twin Peaks: The Return* can itself usefully be seen as a kind of double. It extensively exploits the almost unique situation in which a beloved show is continued after a quarter-century hiatus by superimposing itself on the new versions of *Twin Peaks* its fans have fantasized, consciously or unconsciously, in the interim. The focus of this article is interpretive, and its object of interpretation is *Twin Peaks: The Return*. I will, however, argue that it is impossible to accomplish such an interpretation without taking heed of the expectations of viewers. After critically examining the ways that *The Return* negotiates this superimposition and exploring the different – and often mutually incompatible – interpretive strategies that it thereby encourages, I will conclude that, ultimately, the series achieves a paradoxical fidelity to its predecessor precisely through the liberties and calculated risks that it takes with its own heritage.

The structure of this article is as follows. After laying out some of the specific ways in which *The Return* is permeated with different kinds of doubles and doublings, I move to consider the role of audience expectations, given the quarter-century that fans had to build them up, and how these contribute to yet another kind of doubling: a layering of the "new *Twin Peaks*" that fans wanted – or thought they wanted – on top of the new season that we (for I number myself among the fans) in fact got – or thought we got. After this, I pursue further the role of time in interpretations of *The Return*, tackling the season's anti-nostalgic aspects as well as its – perhaps surprising – insistence on the inexorability of time's passage. This will lead me to consider the important role of confusion in interpretive responses to *The Return*, taking confusion in two senses (appropriately enough, given my focus on doubles). Finally, all my major themes – doubling, superimposition, expectation, confusion, and misrecognition – will intersect in an analysis of the extraordinary fact that the conclusion to *The Return* gives rise to (at least) two equally plausible but radically incompatible interpretations.

An abundance of doubles

Doubling has, of course, been there right from the beginning, in the very title of the show. And not just doubling, but a doubling that hints at the uncanny: the series is not called *Two Peaks*, after all, but *Twin Peaks*, alluding to a venerable tradition that

sees in twins something unsettling and disturbing. The original series also gave us, as Rob E. King points out, 'two lodges (black and white), a BOB and a Bobby, a Mike and Mike', while *Fire Walk with Me* added 'two towns (Deer Meadow and Twin Peaks)' (King 2020). But even in this context the 2017 incarnation of *Twin Peaks* is particularly preoccupied with twins and other kinds of doubles. Its narrative starting point is the uncanny doubling that, in 1991, provided the show's original television run with its cliffhanger ending, in which FBI special agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) – noble, straight-backed and straight-laced but with an infectious *joie de vivre* – became trapped in the place known as the Black Lodge, to be replaced in the outside world by an evil twin. (The film that followed a year later, *Fire Walk with Me*, did nothing to develop this narrative, instead engaging in a different kind of doubling by retelling the story of the murder of Laura Palmer [Sheryl Lee], the mystery of which was the original kernel of the whole series. Unpopular upon its original release, the film's reputation has recently risen substantially; its important to Lynch is indicated by how many of the central aspects of *The Return*'s narrative and mythology made their first appearance in *Fire Walk with Me*.) But not only does *The Return* give us a Good Cooper and a Bad Cooper (see **Figure 1**), it further subdivides the Good Cooper into his familiar self and a man called Dougie Jones, who was created by Bad Cooper in an elaborate ruse and whom the Good Cooper – bewildered and damaged by his exit from the Black Lodge, unable properly to "return" to himself – is taken for, for sixteen of the show's eighteen episodes. But there is still more: the story keeps presenting its viewers with double after double, including various "tulpas" (artificial people, like the original Dougie Jones), eventually culminating in someone who may be Laura Palmer in a parallel reality, or may – just possibly – be an entirely unconnected woman called Carrie Page (who just happens to share an actor with Laura Palmer).

All of this is bewildering, exhilarating and exasperating enough, but there is also a sense in which *The Return* is itself a kind of double. It will, I think, be clear to anyone familiar with the original *Twin Peaks* that the new season's relationship to its predecessor is something that is very much at issue within *The Return*. At various points specific narrative events from the original series are echoed or doubled, as Raechel Dumas points out:

> In the eighth episode, the doppelgänger is shot in a failed attempt on his life, and lies supine on the ground as blood pours from a gaping wound in his abdomen. This scene is reminiscent of the sequence that opens *Twin Peaks* Season 2, in which Cooper… is likewise seen lying on his back, blood flowing from his abdomen and accumulating beneath him.
>
> (Dumas 2019: 330)

Very few television shows have developed quite the following that the original *Twin Peaks* attracted, and still fewer have returned to our screens after a twenty-five year hiatus. That cliffhanger ending had twenty-five years to gestate and ferment in the brains of its viewers; *The Return* is, inescapably, overlaid on a quarter-century of fantasy, expectation, and prediction. Its creators, David Lynch and Mark Frost, make no attempt to escape or to ameliorate this condition. There is, for example, barely the slightest nod towards catching up any viewers who might be unfamiliar with the original (a scene discussing Laura's diary in episode seven solemnly recaps essential plot details in comically insufficient fashion). Not only this, however: *The Return* exploits and manipulates its own status as the double of the return that its aficionados wanted – or thought they wanted. As Kate Rennebohm has written, referring to a phrase prominent in Lynch's earlier work *INLAND EMPIRE*: 'this new *Peaks* confronts its image-saturated audience with an unnerving question that hits at both our insatiable appetite for the familiar and our discomfort with the new: Look at me, and tell me if you've known me before.' (Rennebohm 2017: 64) It is worth noting how this phrase, like *The Return* itself, scrambles the familiar. We might ask whether we've seen someone before, or whether we know somebody ("Do I know you?"), but to ask "if you've known me before" has the flavour of the idiomatic but is also unsettlingly displaced. It also hints at the fact that to continue *Twin Peaks* is not just to add to it but, inevitably, to alter our relation to the original. As did *Fire Walk with Me* in 1991, *The Return* prompts viewers to question whether they really did "know" *Twin Peaks* in the way they thought they did.

Expectations

Time, expectation, and (mis)recognition are, then, not only themes in *The Return* but are also part of the material out of which it – or the viewer's experience of it – is constructed. What might a typical *Twin Peaks* fan, if there is such a thing, have written, if asked to provide a list of what they wanted to see in a new season of the show? It can feel as if *The Return* is a response to such a list in the faithful-to-the-letter-but-not-the-spirit style one sometimes encounters with regard to prophecies or magic wishes in fairy tales or myths. (*The Return* alludes to both, with its references to 'the story of the little girl who lives down the lane' and the Arthurian street names of the development where Dougie and his wife Janey-E [Naomi Watts] live.) Say, for example, that one such fan had been rash enough to wish for "a great deal of Kyle MacLachlan" in season three. They would be unable to complain that their wish hadn't been fulfilled, but they would also never have dreamt that, throughout his indeed ample screen time, MacLachlan would only very briefly appear as the Agent Cooper our putative fan knew and loved. The contrast between the solid familiarity of the name *Twin Peaks* and the confusing abundance of labels for the 2017 season (it was variously referred to as *The Return*, *Season Three*, or – in the rather unlovely subtitle of the DVD and Blu-ray edition – "a limited event series") appropriately reflects the debate played out on fan message boards about whether this really was *Twin Peaks*.

But what exactly would it take to count as such? Andreas Halskov has usefully discussed *The Return* in terms of a combination of familiarity and defamiliarization (Halskov 2017). One could, I would argue, almost read the season as a parody of the notion that it is even possible to define the nature of a thing by isolating and enumerating its elements, recalling Lynch's early explorations of the relation between part and whole in his "Lynch-kits" made of dissected animals (see the discussion in Chion 1995: 181–3). What makes *Twin Peaks* so great, beside extensive screen time for MacLachlan? Elements of soap opera, bizarre and mysterious scenes, daft comedy? It would be hard for even the most disappointed long-term fan to deny that all of these

are present in *The Return*. I agree, incidentally, with Julie Grossman and Will Scheibel when they write that, although *Twin Peaks* 'intensifies the juxtaposition of tones and conventions achieved through its generic heterogeneity, alternating between sadness and humor or humor and horror', it is best understood 'less as an example of postmodern media… than as a self-conscious extension of film and television's standard business of genre mixing, illustrating just how flexible and porous genres can be' (Grossman and Scheibel 2020: xxiii). We might say that the range of ingredients and the *nature* of their combination is relatively consistent between the original *Peaks* and *The Return*, but the *manner* of their combination is not.

Thomas Britt has pointed out that *The Return* includes a scene that explicitly plays with the paradoxes involved in trying to decide from the evidence of what is "here" whether something is "missing":

> In Part 3, 'Call for Help,' Deputy Andy Brennan (Harry Goaz), Lucy Brennan (Kimmy Robertson), and Hawk [Michael Horse] begin to examine evidence related to Cooper and share an extended (comic) variation on the concept of 'that which is and is not,' centered on the language of the difference between some piece of evidence that is 'here' versus 'missing.' As their conversation goes on and on, it becomes clear that a number of difficult propositions are involved in trying to distinguish what is 'here' from what is 'missing.' These include Hawk's question, 'if it's not here, then how do you know it's missing?' and Lucy's answer (another question) 'but if it is here, then it isn't missing?'
>
> (Britt 2019: 112)

If something we loved in the old *Twin Peaks* is absent from *The Return*, how would we know it was missing (rather than, say, simply absent)? But by the same token how can it be that something seems to be missing even when all the necessary components – soap opera, bizarre and mysterious scenes, daft comedy, to reprise the list I suggested above – are present? *The Return* can often feel somehow present but *not* correct.

Yet if my account thus far gives the impression that *The Return* feels like a giant practical joke, simply an attempt to troll its fans, it would be misleading. David McAvoy claims that '[w]here the original series set the template for how fans

collaborate online to find closure… this *Twin Peaks* "trolls" that desire, instead offering scene after anti-climactic scene of characters staring at nothing or brooms sweeping floors. … Lynch's trolling leverages disappointment and boredom into a form of sublimity' (McAvoy 2019: 87). *The Return*'s affective dimensions are – as in so much of Lynch's work – both far richer and far stranger than the ordinary connotations of trolling can accommodate. If we are to think of *The Return* as involving trolling, we need to expand our understanding of the concept, something for which McAvoy makes an interesting case, but one that I am not entirely convinced by because he seems to believe that the boredom *The Return* generates is a fact that is used as a tool, rather than a revisable description; that it remains boredom instead of turning into something else. 'Lynch', he argues, 'is a troll who forces everyone to pause, to be aware of the passage of time as they think through their own boredom' (*ibid.*: 99). But the slow pace of the season also gives the viewer plenty of opportunity to revisit and rethink not only their reactions but also their experiences. I cannot be the only viewer to have found Cooper-as-Dougie's attempts to negotiate an unfamiliar world, like a fully-grown newborn, initially hilarious, subsequently both frustrating, and, yes, a little boring, but ultimately genuinely endearing, such that I came to anticipate missing him when – as was obvious would eventually happen – the old Cooper managed to return. As Richard Martin puts it, the slowness of *The Return* is 'often infuriating, sometimes unbearable, frequently hilarious' (Martin 2020).

I would also argue that we should distinguish more finely between the different scenes that McAvoy labels as boring: the bar-sweeping scene seems to me best to fit his argument, whereas the box-watching scenes in the first episode – although he is quite right about their reflexive dimensions (*ibid.*: 91) – are also suffused with expectation and dread. What's going to happen, and will it be *Twin Peaks*? (I find McAvoy's reading here not incorrect but incomplete.) Simon Hall also takes issue with McAvoy in his analysis of James Hurley (James Marshall) and the two performances of the song "Just You" (another double, in *The Return*, of an aspect of the original series). Rather than another instance of trolling, Hall sees the song's return as an exploration of 'miscommunication' that I would argue has affinities with the themes of misrecognition that I am highlighting here (Hall 2020). (I am

Figure 2: Giving us what we want (*Twin Peaks*, season 3, episode 15. Image screenshot from 9 min 33 secs).

not sure I am wholly persuaded by his arguments that the song's "return" somehow corrects 'the song's original, artistically flawed presentation' – because I am unsure that the elements he points to are where its flaws lie – but the spirit of his analysis seems to me exactly right.) Finally, in places *The Return* teases but ultimately satisfies the viewer in gloriously indulgent but wholly unsarcastic fashion, most particularly when Big Ed Hurley (Everett McGill) and Norma Jennings (Peggy Lipton) finally get together, to the strains of Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long", an event both they and the viewers have had to wait twenty-five years for (see **Figure 2**).

But this account, too, is becoming misleading, if it gives the impression that *The Return* merely toys playfully with fans of *Twin Peaks*; hence the pertinence of the notion of trolling. To introduce Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn), one of the original series' most popular characters, only in the twelfth episode, deny her any interaction with the rest of the old cast while also implying that between seasons two and three she was raped while in a coma by her beloved Agent Cooper (albeit in the form of his evil twin), and then to abandon her on a cliffhanger, never to be seen again, came very close to cruelty. This deliberate inconsistency between indulging and repelling the audience compounds the difficulty of recognising what it is that we are

dealing with in *The Return*, or indeed how we would know whether or not we had successfully done so. Perhaps *The Return* is difficult to recognise because it is not a single consistent thing; as we shall see, such ideas return with a vengeance at the season's conclusion.

Nostalgia and the inexorability of time

The Return clearly has no wish simply to indulge viewer nostalgia, despite the fact that nostalgia is crucial to the "motherhood and cherry pie" aspects of the original *Twin Peaks*. This much, however, might have been predicted, given Lynch's work during the intervening years. It is easy to agree, and to believe that Lynch and Frost would agree, with Pacôme Thiellement's comment, in one of the two issues of *Cahiers du cinéma* devoted to *The Return*, that 'to try to replay past happiness *exactly like before*, as the majority of current film production does (superhero films, reboots or remakes), is to *freeze the past* and seal up the world in a kind of dead non-time which keeps us powerless' (Thiellement 2017: 11; my translation). But it is nevertheless surprising, particularly given the fantastic dimensions of its narrative, the extent to which *The Return* insists that time is something real that cannot simply be wished – or conjured – away. I am not entirely convinced by Matthew Lau's suggestion that for Lynch 'history is cyclical as much as linear' (Lau 2020). History may contain repetition, and its linearity may be much more complex than we thought, but *The Return* continually insists on the *irrecoverability* of that which has happened, which is I think what we most often mean when we say that time is linear. We confront time's passage and the irrecoverability of the past in the aging of the actors, reinforced by the fact that many viewers will barely, if at all, have seen any of the original cast onscreen in the intervening years. Dale Cooper has clearly aged twenty-five years, even though he has spent that time trapped in a magical place "between two worlds"; Matt Hills points out that *The Return* 'collapses together the extra-diegetic and diegetic passing of time since its original 1990s incarnation' (Hills 2018: 311). Matthew Ellis and Tyler Theus interestingly compare the image of Laura whispering to Cooper from the original series and its reprise in *The Return* (it is the final image we see, playing out in slow-motion under the credits of the last episode):

> In the original sequence, Kyle MacLachlan appears in heavy makeup to make him appear 25 years older while Laura appears to remain as young as she was at the time of her death. At the end of the *Return*, both Laura and Cooper appear to have aged, with no attempts to hide the age of the respective actors. Are we to read this as the same moment depicted in the original series? Or have Cooper and Laura been returned to the Black Lodge after the disintegration of the world with Carrie Page and Richard? If so, what does this tell us about the original image, and the non-diegetic, lived time between the two scenes?
>
> (Ellis and Theus 2019: 34)

These are important but very difficult questions. I depart, however, from Ellis and Theus's emphasis on the artificiality, or the arbitrariness, of the relationship between past and present. For them, *The Return* 'suggests instead that *any* epistemological grounding based in some index of the past is mere construction' and that 'it is the past's own indeterminateness that determines the future' (*ibid.*: 34 & 35). I want to argue that, for all its inscrutable non-linearity, time in *The Return* proves both real and impossible to master; the *diegetic* 'lived time between the two scenes' is also crucial. It is certainly true that '*The Return* treats its original historical moment as something the meaning of which has to be continuously worked through in the present' (*ibid.*: 34), but the result of this stance is often that knowledge of the past and its relation to our present often comes to be seen as confusing, distressing, elusive, or misleading, rather than as a 'mere construction'. Ellis and Theus's reading risks undercutting the exploration of trauma that is one of *The Return*'s strongest links both to the original *Peaks* and to Lynch's cinematic work in the intervening years. (Diane's narration of her rape by Cooper certainly does not indicate that her 'epistemological grounding' in her memory of that event is 'mere construction'.) It is the fact that time's very *determinateness* is often impossible to grasp, rather than any supposed discovery of its 'indeterminateness', that *The Return* so frequently and distressingly insists upon; Cooper, after all, announces in episode seventeen that 'the past *dictates* the future' (my emphasis).

As many commentators have noted, time's passage and its consequences are further underlined by the dedications of each episode to members of cast and crew who have died, some in the period between the original *Twin Peaks* and its return (such as Frank Silva and Don S. Davis) but others (including Miguel Ferrer and Warren Frost) after shooting their contributions to season three. Perhaps most notable among this latter group is Catherine E. Coulson, whose final appearances as Margaret Lanterman, the Log Lady, were filmed only days before her death, as is movingly evident in her performance. Alistair Mactaggart notes another, highly relevant, doubling here: 'Part 1 is dedicated "In Memory of Catherine Coulson," who *plays* the Log Lady, and Part 15 "In Memory of Margaret Lanterman," the *character* of the Log Lady – both are accorded the same level of acknowledgment' (Mactaggart 2020). By emphasizing the recent deaths of so many of its contributors, *The Return* puts unusual stress on the *transition* from life to death, and the uncanniness of the way that our knowledge of death in the real world both does and does not affect the screen world. Even death, however, did not prevent old cast members from making a reappearance. Don S. Davis's major and Frank Silva's BOB (as well as a young Laura Palmer) appear in *The Return*, but in uncanny forms that do not disguise their origin as, precisely, *images*: the major's figure floats above a star-strewn void while BOB and Laura appear in strange, mysteriously floating orbs. These appearances thus both gesture towards the possibility of cheating death (the dead can live on screen) and yet, in not disguising their origin in footage shot for the original *Twin Peaks*, also acknowledge death's reality (what is on screen is merely an image).

Confusions

We might say, then, that *The Return* both insists on the reality of death and exploits the resources of film for confusing the boundary between life and death. It is useful in this context to bear in mind two different senses of the word "confusion". There is both the familiar affective sense ("I'm confused!") but there is also an older sense that was employed, for example, by Alexander Baumgarten – who has cause to be considered the founder of aesthetics – in the eighteenth century. As Terry Eagleton explains, for Baumgarten confusion 'means not "muddle" but "fusion": in

their organic interpenetration, the elements of aesthetic representation resist that discrimination into discrete units which is characteristic of conceptual thought' (Eagleton 1990: 15). (I make use of this distinction extensively in Lash 2020; see pp. 13–17 for an introductory discussion.) Both senses are helpful in coming to terms with the doublings of *The Return* and the (mis)recognitions they give rise to; our confusion in the first sense, and that of the characters, is frequently prompted by confusions in the second sense; *The Return* frequently resists 'discrimination into discrete units'.

A running joke in *The Return* (one that developed out of deleted scene from *Fire Walk with Me* that is included in *The Missing Pieces* and which also recalls a famous scene from *Lost Highway*) refers to the changes wrought by the passage of time as well as exploring uncanny connections between time and space: the inability of Lucy to understand mobile telephones. In episode four of *The Return*, Lucy faints when Sheriff Frank Truman (Robert Forster) enters the sheriff station, still talking to her on his cell phone. On one level, of course, this is a joke about the contemporary relevance of *Twin Peaks*: if its characters had been in limbo for twenty-five years, what would they not understand about the contemporary world? What specifically disturbs Lucy, however, is that cell phones seem to allow somebody to be in two places at once: she thinks Sheriff Truman is away fishing, so cannot understand how he can also be in the sheriff station. In episode seventeen, the Evil Cooper enters the station, only for the Good Cooper to phone Lucy shortly afterwards from the Mitchum brothers' car. Once she has seen both Coopers she exclaims to Andy "I understand cellular phones now!" People can indeed be in two places at once, she now realizes – though this implies that she thinks that, at the very least, everyone she has spoken to on a cell phone must have a doppelgänger! Lucy is not disturbed by non-mobile telephones, so she is clearly comfortable with two distant spaces being connected at a single time; what confuses and upsets her is when this fixed relationship becomes malleable. Having this explained by the presence of two Coopers is less distressing to her than the experience of talking to somebody and not knowing where they are; mobile phones seem alarmingly to suggest to Lucy that – to distort Ellis and Theus's formulation – her "epistemological grounding based

in some index of the *present* is mere construction". Lucy needs the two meanings of "present" to be kept separate, not to become confused in our second sense: when speaking to somebody on the phone, she and her interlocutor occupy the same present moment, which she also treats as an index of the fact that they are *not* – cannot be – both present in the same space.

If Lucy is upset by the need to pin down *where* somebody is, *The Return* builds to a similarly intense consternation about *when* they are, as expressed by Dale Cooper's final question, the last words of the entire season: "What year is this?" *The Return* hints at different possible ways of interpreting its temporality, bewildering in themselves as well as in conjunction. Mike, the one-armed man (Al Strobel) repeatedly asks "Is it future or is it past?" The possibility that "it" is in fact *present* is conspicuous by its absence, but one possible answer to Mike's question is that it is neither; "it" is a single moment which can, by definition, be neither future nor past. The ringing sound that intrigues a number of characters in *The Return* seems to be a stretched-out version of the sound the mysterious ring with the owl insignia makes when it falls to the ground, as happens a number of times when characters wearing the ring are sucked into the Black Lodge, their body disappearing but the ring remaining behind in the outside world. Does the elongated sound indicate that the whole season takes place in one such moment? In the climactic scene in the sheriff station in episode seventeen, the clock hovers permanently at 2:53, and after the final defeat of the evil BOB, in one of the simplest and yet most perplexing effects in the whole season, Dale Cooper's puzzled and distressed face is superimposed over the action for more than three minutes (see **Figure 3**), in what Britt calls 'one of *The Return*'s foremost examples of visual montage reinforcing the theme of "that which is, and is not"' (Britt 2019: 115). Superimposition becomes literal as the image itself is doubled, leading to serious difficulties in answering the question of when these things are happening. Is everything in *The Return* "confused" into a single moment, perhaps the aforementioned moment in the Red Room in which Laura Palmer whispers in Dale Cooper's ear, to his mounting confusion and distress, in the final image of the season? But we have already seen Ellis and Theus point out that we cannot be sure that this moment *is* but a single moment.

Figure 3: When is this? (*Twin Peaks*, season 3, episode 17. Image screenshot from 32 mins 21 secs).

In contrast to this singularity, another interpretive possibility is the idea that the series represents intersecting dreams. In episode fourteen, FBI director Gordon Cole (David Lynch) recounts a dream he had in which Monica Bellucci told him, echoing the Upanishads, that "we are like the dreamer, who dreams and then lives inside the dream" (we might say that the dreamer becomes confused with the dream). She follows this statement up with the question, "but who is the dreamer?" (This sequence also confuses the real with the fictional, appropriately enough given its concern with dream and reality, as the real Monica Bellucci plays a fictionalized version of herself appearing in the dream of a fictional character who is played by the writer and director of this very scene…) Bellucci's question might send us searching for a singular answer: Laura Palmer? Dale Cooper? The mysterious "Richard" that Cooper seems to become, at least temporarily, in episode eighteen? But perhaps *The Return*'s persistent doubles and echoes should instead cue us to look for multiple answers. (Perhaps every viewer of *Twin Peaks* dreams their own version, then lives inside that dream. But note also that Bellucci does not say that we *are* the dreamer, but that we are *like* the dreamer.) Are the sequences featuring Audrey her dream (from which she perhaps wakes up in the final shot of her in an empty white room)? Perhaps the

traffic jam caused by a young boy accidentally setting off a gun in episode eleven, in which Deputy Bobby Briggs (Dana Ashbrook) encounters an angrily impatient driver and a spookily sick girl, is Bobby's dream.

Incompatible interpretations

Such multiple, apparently incompatible, interpretive strategies have been prompted by many of Lynch's works, and increasingly so by his work since the first *Twin Peaks*; any series as complex, deliberately mysterious, and elusive as *The Return* is of course going to give rise to a range of interpretations. The simple presence of multiple possible interpretations by no means entails that all conclusions are equally plausible. We can still weigh up possibilities against each other, and even if we cannot decide on a single "correct" interpretation, that does not preclude ruling out some as lacking sufficient warrant. But whereas in films such as *INLAND EMPIRE* Lynch explored the possibility of multiple plausible but incompatible interpretations (see Lash 2020: 51–68), in the conclusion to *The Return* he steps up the interpretive intensity by constructing, with great affective power, the possibility of *diametrically opposed* interpretations. There are far too many details for me to be able to go into this in real depth, so I will be highly selective.

So, to sketch the outlines of the end of the narrative: *The Return* concludes with Dale Cooper travelling back in time to the night of Laura Palmer's murder, apparently preventing her from being killed. (Clearly echoing the story of Orpheus and Eurydice [see Frost 2018, 23'42"], he leads her through the woods, constantly looking back at her, only for her to vanish; all that remain are the strange sounds the Fireman played Cooper at the very beginning of *The Return* and Laura's scream.) He then "crosses over" to what appears to be some kind of parallel or alternative reality. In a diner called Judy's he displays characteristics reminiscent of both the original Cooper and his doppelgänger, having both the Good Cooper's dynamic efficiency and something of the Bad Cooper's rather robotic coldness. Have the uncanny doubles been superimposed on one another? It is suggested that Cooper's experiences have altered him, or – just possibly – that most of *The Return* never

happened. (After Laura vanishes in the woods we cut directly to Cooper with Mike in the Red Room, who again asks, as he did in episode two, "Is it future or is it past?" Cooper then leaves the Red Room and is met by Diane. Was the rest of *The Return* – between the two instances of Mike's question, which is perhaps actually one instance repeated, or doubled – simply the dream of a still-trapped Cooper? Or, given that after sleeping with Diane he wakes up in a different motel to that in which he went to sleep and finds a note to "Richard" telling him that "Linda" is leaving him, perhaps it has all been Richard's dream? *The Return* engages with the most derided of all serial television devices – "it was all a dream" – by pushing it so far that it empties itself out. What exactly would it explain if we were to learn that the events of *Twin Peaks* "never really happened"? Did we think that they *did*?) Cooper then tracks down the woman known as Carrie Page, whom – he tells her – he believes to be Laura Palmer, and takes her to what he thinks is her house in Twin Peaks. The trip awakens no memories in Carrie, however, and the owners of the house profess no knowledge of Laura's mother, Sarah (Grace Zabriskie) – who we have learnt earlier in the season to be possessed by some kind of violent demon, which may or may not be an ancient evil known as Judy. Mactaggart puts it well, highlighting a number of the "confusions" and misrecognitions that intersect, confusingly, at this point:

> Initially, indeed, the "Palmer" household looks as it has always done from the outside in this season. But, upon finding that it is owned and occupied by Alice Tremond (Mary Reber, the current owner of the actual house) and bought from a Mrs. Chalfont, Cooper and Carrie (and the audience) are at a loss. Compounding and confusing names from the previous seasons with no explanation, we are left here in a decidedly unsettled state.
>
> (Mactaggart 2020)

Perplexed, confused, and crestfallen, Cooper asks what year it is. We faintly hear Sarah's voice (from the first season) calling "Laura!" and Carrie – or Laura, or whoever she is – begins to scream; simultaneously, the lights in the house suddenly go out.

Figure 4: Success or failure? (*Twin Peaks*, season 3, episode 18. Image screenshot from 53 mins 52 secs).

The sheer desolation of the way the final episode builds to this conclusion strikes me as at least as radical as *The Return*'s much-discussed eighth episode; it also undercuts what may now seem the rather too neat "explanation" that the earlier episode, for all its obscurities, offers by providing what Mark Frost has called 'an origin story for the evil that we had been depicting' (Frost 2018, 19'55'' – 20'03''). One of the most obvious questions it raises is, of course, who has won (see **Figure 4**)? Has Judy been defeated or not? This cannot simply be written off as a case of "it can mean whatever you want" because the alternatives are so starkly differentiated and not something any viewer invested in the series could possibly be ambivalent about. If Cooper has succeeded, Sarah's cries of "Laura" may – if Sarah is now Judy – be cries of frustration (recall her attacking the photograph of Laura in episode seventeen), and Carrie's scream might be a response to Laura's memories flooding back in now that she is, in fact, safe. Cooper's consternation might reflect the fact that he himself, having saved Laura, is now trapped in a world that is not his own; perhaps the forces of what seems to be the White Lodge, such as the mysterious Fireman (Carel Struycken), are not as straightforwardly benevolent as they may seem, and not be above sacrificing Cooper to a higher cause. (This, broadly, is David Auerbach's conclusion in Auerbach

2017.) The alternative, of course, is that Cooper has played right into Judy's hands and delivered Laura to her. Laura's scream then represents her recognition of this horrific fate. (Britt is more or less of this opinion; see Britt 2019: 116–117.)

This ending is so bewildering because it is neither a case of a sudden twist nor, in any straightforward sense, what is known as a "retcon" (see Lau 2020), because a retcon usually changes the meaning or status of past events in a fiction (as in, for example, the revelation of Pam Ewing's dream in *Dallas* or the identity of the Timeless Child in *Doctor Who*), whereas Cooper's actions here mean that the entire arc of *Twin Peaks could not have happened*, not even in a dream. Be that as it may, the crucial question here is what exactly Cooper has been *doing* for the twenty-five years since the original *Twin Peaks*; the conclusion prompts both character and audience to ask this question. (Cooper's predicament might therefore be seen as an allegory of the viewer's: the conclusion forces us to consider, one last time, whether we recognise what we have been watching.) At the beginning of episode one, in the season's very first reference to doubling, the Fireman tells Cooper to remember "two birds, one stone". In episode seventeen Gordon Cole informs us that the last thing Cooper told him before his disappearance was that he was "trying to kill two birds with one stone". If, as seems most plausible, we take this to refer to both saving Laura and defeating Judy, then the entire arc of the season represents a movement towards an accomplishment of this plan; this is what everything has been building towards for twenty-five years. But how might we best describe what he was trying to do? "Saving Laura and defeating Judy", as I just suggested or, say, 'weaponizing Laura' in order to defeat Judy, as Joshua Jones suggests (Jones 2020)? It may well be that Cooper thought he was doing the former but, at the season's conclusion, is just beginning to realize that he may in fact have been doing the latter.[1]

[1] There is a philosophical account of recognition and misrecognition informing my thinking about *The Return*; it would derail this article to explore it in detail, but I want at least to acknowledge it. This account involves the Hegelian idea that, according to the accounts of scholars such as Robert B. Pippin, agency is best seen as social, as expressive and in many senses as retrospective, as well as both revisable and fallible, rather than as the causal outcome of internally formulated intentions. What we can be said to have done is neither a mechanical nor a private matter; if I think I have complimented you but everyone else thinks I insulted you, my intentions have no uniquely privileged status. (Convincing others that I did intend a compliment might go some way to excusing the insult but it is

Whether or not the plan has in fact played into Judy's hands, the distressing conclusion seems to be that Cooper – like the audience – was sure what he (we) wanted but turns out merely to have been yet one more man certain of what was best for a woman. Jones seems to me entirely correct to argue that in *The Return* 'the desire for certain knowledge and meaning is problematized by its connection to a masculinized desire for mastery' (Jones 2020). That Cooper's entire plan could be misguided is a possibility that is masked by our desperate desire for him to "wake up" from his "Dougie-state", a desire that is excruciatingly sustained over sixteen out of eighteen episodes. The audience's energies are thereby aligned with Cooper's; our desires double his own. On this reading, "What year is it?" might acquire an overlay of savage sarcasm – the answer being: "Not 1991 anymore!" What we most wanted – to have the old Dale Cooper back – turns out to be about the worst possible outcome. What we learn about Cooper parallels what Cooper learns about Laura, that – as the narrator of Proust's novel puts it – '[w]e can sometimes find a person again, but we cannot abolish time' (Proust 2001: 262).

In hindsight, some obvious deficiencies of Cooper's plan become clearer, whether or not Judy has been defeated. He wants Laura Palmer never to have died, but were this to have been the case, he would never have travelled to Twin Peaks, and thus, as I mentioned above, *Twin Peaks* could never have existed. For all that some fans will find it sacrilegious to consider Cooper to be in error, or that this development might be seen as another instance of aggressively trolling a devoted fanbase, such

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very unlikely to make people think that they were simply *wrong* that it was an insult; crucially, though, it might well complicate their description of what I did.) Pippin further suggests that the intelligibility of artworks can be seen to have affinities with these processes of intersubjective account-giving; see Pippin (2014) for Hegelian readings of paintings by the likes of Manet and Cézanne along these lines. The conclusion to *The Return* revolves, then, around the relationship between what Dale Cooper thinks he has done, what we think he – and the season as a whole – have done, and what they have actually done; this relationship is anything but simple. (I am currently exploring these and related ideas in a book on Pippin and film, forthcoming in Bloomsbury's *Film Thinks* series.) There might be other Hegelian resonances in the fact that *The Return* ends in a contradiction, given the centrality of contradiction to Hegel's thought. And it is, finally, intriguing that the most important film with an equally prominent Judy, a film just as concerned as *The Return* with recognition and misrecognition, namely Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, also ends in potentially contradictory ambiguity that 'could bear scores of different meanings' (Pippin 2017: 212).

a denouement is by no means an entirely arbitrary imposition by Lynch and Frost. On the contrary, it explores another side of features of Cooper that are central to the character; his determination and bravery have always been allied to a stiffness that, in the first season, was deployed to endearing effect, such as when he gently turns down Audrey in episode six, telling her: "When a man joins the Bureau he takes an oath to uphold certain values. Values that he's sworn to live by. This is wrong, Audrey. We both know it." Jean-Philippe Tessé articulates this interpretation of the conclusion to *The Return* very well:

> Why did Cooper not sense the complete absurdity of such a project? It is because this agent's chivalric spirit – driven to delirium by the inflexibility of his oaths (to the FBI in the first place) – tends spontaneously towards the ultimate romantic gesture, romanticism being the continuation of the chivalric novel, and then becomes Don Quixotism: his quest, his commitment turns into a remake that is catastrophic, tragic, even pathetic, of the finale of *The Searchers*, leaving him hunched, impotent, stupid, condemned to wander endlessly in the limbo of time, Ulysses lost forever, without destiny.
>
> (Tessé 2017: 13; my translation)

The connection to John Ford's *The Searchers* – in which Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) sets out to find his niece Debbie (Natalie Wood), who has been abducted and raped by Native Americans, rescues her and returns her to her family, but is left with no option for himself other than departure, retreating to wander endlessly in the wilderness – is intriguing. Edwards actually plans to kill Debbie, not to rescue her as he in fact ends up doing; does *The Return* darkly reverse this structure? In Robert Pippin's interpretation of *The Searchers* we eventually 'learn how extraordinarily difficult it is to provide the proper act description of just what it was that was done, to describe properly the quest in the first place and its unexpected ending' (Pippin 2010: 131); the same is true of the conclusion to *The Return*. A further possibility, however, is that Cooper is attempting a 'catastrophic, tragic, even pathetic' remake not of *The Searchers* but of *Twin Peaks* itself – an impossible remake in which Laura Palmer did not die. On this reading, Dennis Lim's description of *Mulholland Dr.* resonates uncannily with

The Return: 'reconstituted from the ruins of an abandoned project, [it] represents a triumphant second chance, but the story it tells is of a botched reenactment, rooted in a doomed yet irresistible urge to rewrite the past' (Lim 2015: 157).

To sum up: I have argued that *The Return* combines a diegetic and thematic preoccupation with doubles and doubling with a reflexive awareness of itself as a double. It is not, however, a double of the original *Twin Peaks*. Rather, it deliberately resists this status, playing instead with the way its reception is shaped by the ways it is doubled by the "new *Peaks*" that its audience wanted, or at least *thought* they wanted. These features play out throughout the series in themes of confusion, recognition, and misrecognition that are, once again, operative both diegetically and in the relation between series and viewer. The confusions that *The Return* works with are both affective and, we might say, structural, involving the blurring or inextricable intertwining of states that cannot pertain simultaneously, such as life and death ("I am dead, yet I live", says Laura in Part 1), or past and present. This tendency reaches an intense culmination at the very end of the series, when Cooper and viewer are utterly confused about where they are, when they are, and whether Laura has or has not been rescued. Martha Nochimson sees the conclusion as prompting us to dissociate ourselves from Cooper, arguing that 'the 2017 series can be seen as a call to reclaim the human in the universe he has depicted by distancing ourselves from recipes for action summed up by the formulaic hero that can only lead to nonexistence. The epic hero as a liberating negative example!' (Nochimson 2019: 267) There is something attractive and plausible in such an interpretation, and yet it also risks avoiding, rather than confronting, the confusions and contradictions of *The Return* by explaining them away as therapeutic. To use a Freudian term: if they are to prove therapeutic, there will be a great deal of "working through" required for us to reach that point. Jones argues that the conclusion 'encourages viewers to renounce the quest for closure, to interrogate their complicity with and renegotiate the terms of their investment in its violence, by shifting focus – and thus, potentially, identification – to Laura' (Jones 2020). This seems to me right, as long as we recognise the possibility of different ways of 'shifting focus'. To shift too abruptly and readily might, once again, be to avoid truly 'interrogat[ing] [our] complicity'. The

disorientation that Cooper's final situation provokes need not merely indicate that we were *too* aligned with Cooper but might also prompt us to probe not only *why* we were so aligned, but *what* exactly we were aligned with.

For Hills, *The Return* ultimately marks the defeat, not only of Cooper, but of *Twin Peaks*, its absorption into something alien to the original: 'Marked by generational seriality, and its differentiations between then/now, *Twin Peaks: The Return* is not what it seems: rather than a return, it absorbs David Lynch and Mark Frost's 1990s "cult classic" into the more recent Lynchverse' (Hills 2018: 323). Hills's article was written only six episodes into *The Return*, but the season's subsequent development is, I would suggest, unlikely to have altered his view (note that Halskov also points out how many elements of non-*Peaks* Lynchiana are referenced in *The Return*). As convincing as this account is, however, it seems to me to underestimate the extent to which *The Return* can be what it is only by means both of the original *Twin Peaks* and the quarter-century gap separating the two. This is not simply because it is a case of "fan disservice" (*ibid.*: 317) or trolling; to see it as such would be to assume a static account of fan desire and a binary understanding of what would count as its fulfilment. It is in fact precisely the unflinching way that *The Return* explores the futility of an attempt at a "return", its willingness to demonstrate how self-deluded this would be, despite – or perhaps even because of – the fact that nostalgia is central to the very texture of *Twin Peaks*, that makes the season into something much greater than just such a doomed remake. The delicious paradox is that it is by *destroying* the possibility of a return to *Twin Peaks*, or of successfully constructing its doppelgänger, that *The Return* ends up faithful to what was really so remarkable about the original series: its capacity to remain at one and the same time utterly distinctive and perpetually elusive.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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